

## The Fresh Food That More and More Cat Behaviorists Recommend

Tracy Dion, an army veteran, grandmother, and online coach & counselor for cat parents who need help with behavior, nutrition or health issues. Tracy shares her top tips & tricks for picking the best food for your cat, making the switch to fresh, and why she's a fan of one fresh meal in particular.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today's Cat Week guest is Tracy Dion, a cat lover who has spent the last two decades helping owners with behavior and nutrition questions through her website and Facebook group
- Tracy began her journey to feeding her pets fresh food after the heartbreak of losing a kitten to contaminated commercial cat food
- Tracy's favorite topic is feline nutrition and she discusses not only the different types of fresh food diets, but also how to transition a cat from a dry or canned diet to a fresh diet
- She also covers the pros and cons of cooked food, the best way to offer bones to cats and her personal favorite fresh diet for cats
- Tracy also offers tips for how to work with a veterinarian who isn't a fan of raw feeding

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Celebrating Cat Week with me today is Tracy Dion. Tracy is 52, a military veteran, and a grandmother with two lovely little granddaughters.

*"Probably like everybody watching, I've adored cats all my life," says Tracy. "When I was young, I worked heavily in rescue with all kinds of pets — cats, dogs, birds, reptiles and rabbits. It really didn't matter. But about two decades ago, I narrowed my focus to just cats.*

*In 2007, I began helping owners who had behavior and nutrition questions on online forums. In 2011, I founded the educational website **CatCentric**, and shortly thereafter, the **CatCentric Facebook group**, which now hosts over 11,000 members. I write for a variety of magazines and spend several hours a week helping cat owners. It's one of the most satisfying parts of my life."*

Tracy and I met virtually when I came across a beautiful soul who does a wonderful job coaching cat owners through the ups and downs of caring for their animal companions. The services Tracy provides through CatCentric are invaluable.

## One of the Most Critical Choices We Will Ever Make for Cats

When I decided to include her in my Cat Week interviews, I asked Tracy what topics she feels are most important to cat parents today, and she had a very quick response.

*"I wanted to start with one of my absolute favorite topics," says Tracy, "and that's feline nutrition, specifically feeding a fresh diet. Proper nutrition is the foundation of good health. It affects every aspect of a cat's life, even behavior. Feeding a balanced fresh food diet is one of the most critical and beneficial choices we will ever make for our cats."*

*There are several ways we can source and feed fresh. Each has its own drawbacks and benefits. Most convenient is probably just purchasing commercial raw food. There are quite a few on the market today. Rad Cat is my favorite. More are becoming available all the time.*

*I just ask everybody to pay attention to the ingredients. You don't want fruits and vegetables to be a large percentage of the formula. Sometimes with commercial products, that does happen."*

*Commercial diets are easy to source and feed, but they can be a bit pricey. It's easy in part because it's a completely ground product. You can make your own ground product meals at home using tried and tested recipes. I often recommend your recipes from your book, 'Dr. Becker's Real Food for Healthy Dogs and Cats: Simple Homemade Food.'"*

Nice! A little plug there!

## Tips for Making the Transition to a Fresh Diet

I asked Tracy to offer some recommendations for how to start feeding a fresh diet, because it can be overwhelming for cat owners to take on. Where should they start?

*"Start easy," Tracy answered. "Start small. Most people start by making raw food for themselves or making a chicken dinner or something, and they just give the cat a piece of their meat. It doesn't have to be a stressful thing. Just start small."*

A comment I often hear is, "I tried fresh food, but my cat doesn't like it." I asked Tracy how she counsels people who have those concerns.

*"All cats can be transitioned, at least in my experience," says Tracy. "All cats can be transitioned to a healthier diet. Some of them just take longer than others. Some of them just need a different approach. There are all kinds of different tips and tricks you can use."*

*On my website, I have an article that has a really comprehensive list of every tip and trick I've ever heard of. But my favorite is a really low-stress, easy method. Just take a pea-sized bit of whatever it is you want to feed. It can be prey model raw (PMR), whole prey, or ground."*

*Put it on your cat's plate, next to his regular food, and walk away. If he eats it, great. If he doesn't, that's okay too. Just throw it away. Just keep doing this every meal, every single day.*

*What you're doing is helping your cat understand that the strange-looking, smelly little bit is actually food. Eventually, the cat will try it. And then you just put down a couple of pieces, and then you put down three pieces, and then you slowly reduce the amount of commercial product and increase the raw food until he's eating all raw.*

*The very first thing I tell people to do is get their cats off kibble and off free-feeding. Free-feeding is an unhealthy practice to begin with, and when cats have food available all the time, they don't have much incentive to try anything new. I recommend going to timed meals, three a day at least, and four a day if you can manage it. That's the very first step.*

*The second step is they have to research all the different ways to feed raw. There's the commercial ground. There's homemade ground. There are recipes to try like the one in your book and Dr. Lisa Pierson has a great ground recipe at [CatInfo.org](http://CatInfo.org).*

*You can also consider the prey model raw diet. You can even do a whole prey diet. Pick which one fits your lifestyle and your resources, and then work to transition your cat to that. Only if that doesn't work, then take a step back and maybe transition from kibble to canned, or kibble to ground, and then to PMR or whole prey or whatever your eventual diet will be."*

## **The Sad Reason Many Cat Parents Switch to Fresh Food Diets**

I asked Tracy to describe how she discovered fresh feeding for cats. For most people, it usually comes from having a sick cat. It's often heartbreak that leads people to look into feeding their animals outside the processed pet food box.

*"That's the saddest thing," says Tracy. "That is the most heartbreaking statistic, but you're absolutely right. It happened to me. Back in 2006, I pulled a litter of feral kittens off the streets. All four of them were sickened in the 2007 melamine poisoning disaster, and one of the kittens died.*

*I'd already done some research by that time into processed cat food products and taken my cats off of kibble, so they were only eating canned. But after Ollie died, I really started digging into it. I really started trying to get familiar with the regulations around pet food, or, more accurately, the lack thereof, as well as the pet food industry's processing methods and ingredients."*

It's an eye-opening experience to learn about the processed pet food business, especially after you've lost a pet. You no longer have trust in the industry, and you have no idea where to turn.

## **Pluses and Minuses of Cooked Homemade Diets and Bones**

Next I asked Tracy how she feels about cooked diets for cats.

*"Cooking does destroy some of the nutrition in the food," she replied, "but there are supplements available that you can add back in. The more you cook food — the more you process it in any manner — the more you deplete its nutritional value, which means more supplements the further away from fresh you get. But it can be a great way to transition a cat away from a processed diet.*

*You can start by lightly searing kidney or liver. If your cat's like, 'Oh, I'm not touching that,' you can lightly sear the outside of it. That may entice him to start eating it. As time goes by, just cook it less and less."*

I had a cat who initially had no interest in eating the bones in his raw diet. He eventually did, but it took him a good year. I asked Tracy how she answers people who say, "You know what, I can't get my brain around a ground product. I can't get my cat interested in eating bony foods."

*"I do have a lot of people who say things like that. Sometimes I think it's the owner who's worried rather than the cat. But cats can be transitioned onto bone, you just have to start very slowly and, really, you have to use the appropriate-sized bone.*

*I see a lot of people trying to feed their cats chicken thighbones or the third joint of the chicken wing or something like that. It's just too thick to ask a cat to eat. Think about their natural prey. We're talking mice, rats and birds. Those animals have really tiny, easy-to-crunch bones. I mean you can break them with your bare hands, that's how tiny they are.*

*The first step is to make sure you're not trying to give the cat something he shouldn't be eating in the first place. Make it nice and small. If you can't break it with your bare hands, don't feed it to your cat.*

## **Deciding What Type of Fresh Diet to Feed Your Cat**

There are a lot of different ways to feed fresh, and a lot of different theories about which is best. It can be overwhelming for someone who's trying to make a decision about how to feed his or her cat. I asked Tracy to talk about some of the basic types of fresh diets.

*"Well, we've already covered commercial, which is typically a ground product," she explained. "Commercial is easy to source and feed, but it can be a bit pricey. It's easy in part because it's a completely ground product, and I mentioned this already.*

*Or you can make your own ground meals at home using one of a few tried-and-tested recipes. You just want to be careful with online recipes and insure they are tried and tested and come from a resource you can trust. The benefit to sourcing and grinding the ingredients yourself is two-fold. You can save on the cost of commercial ground product. And because you buy the ingredients yourself, you can control the quality of the foods your cat is eating.*

*You can also tweak it if your kitty has an allergy or sensitivity to a certain protein, or a health issue like kidney disease that requires the phosphorus level be adjusted a bit.*

*The next fresh food option is PMR, or prey model raw. Using this method, you can purchase muscle meats, organs, and bone, like chicken ribs, and feed them on a schedule, so at the end of a given time period, which is typically a week, your cat will have eaten 83 percent muscle meat, 7 percent bone and 10 percent organs, with half of that being liver.*

*This guideline, 83-7-10, is modeled after the average percentages in a cat's natural diet of small rodents and birds, and it differs from the canine guidelines in that it requires a slightly lower bone content. PMR is definitely the least expensive raw feeding option. It's also the most time-consuming. You have to cut up the meals in portion sizes, and you have to insure your cat eats everything offered to maintain the proper nutrient balance.*

*If she stops eating the bone in her meals or refuses to eat the organs, you have to either entice her to eat them or you have to switch to whole prey, a ground diet or even back to canned. You want to make sure she's getting a nutritionally balanced diet.*

*The final fresh food option is simply feeding whole prey, such as mice, rats, quail, etc. I know this one's a little difficult for people, but it is, by far, the easiest option. It's how I feed my cats today. Just buy the frozen prey in portioned sizes, thaw it and serve. There's no prepping. There's no packing. Best of all, there's no waste. It's my favorite way to feed a cat."*

## **Dealing With Parasites in Whole Prey**

I call whole prey feeders hardcore raw feeders, because — and I have a lot of them as clients — they typically become farmers of small mammals. They're farming mice, voles, moles and small rabbits. They're growing prey food for their cats. That is, hands down, how you know for sure exactly what your cats are eating. As Tracy said, it makes it very, very easy.

But in my opinion, it takes extra commitment to be able to do that, to make the mental and sometimes physical leap, depending on how much space you have. But it's definitely the way cats evolved to eat. My cats find mice both inside and outside my house, and one thing I should point out is there are parasites in the GI tracts of prey animals, which means there's potential for non-life-threatening GI parasites in cats who eat them.

It's not a big deal, but once or twice a year, if your cat is consuming prey including the GI tract, you want to have your veterinarian check his poop for parasites. Now, if you're buying whole prey, most farmed whole prey has been checked to insure it's parasite-free. If you're out hunting baby rabbits for your cats, know that all wild animals carry parasites, and you'll want to remove their GI tracts. So that's my spiel on parasites.

## **How Tracy Feeds Whole Prey**

*Tracy orders whole prey from a variety of different producers. "I don't have the time to farm my own," she explains. "My focus is on helping people, so time is my tightest resource. I have no time to be raising mice or rats, or hunting them. I order it. It comes to me in a big box. I have a chest freezer that's just for the cats. I just drop the prey right in there.*

*When I need the food, I put it in some warm water and thaw it out, and then put it on their plates — one, two, three, four, five, six — and I'm done.*

*I have one or two cats who will sometimes leave the tail behind, but I have two other cats who are scavengers. They check for leftovers. I feed my cats in cages so they don't drag the food around the house. When I release everybody, the scavengers will go and check all the cages. So there's never anything left behind.*

*And quail. I actually started snipping the wings off the quail because there's just so much feather on the wings. A lot of times, they'll leave the wings or they'll leave a ton of feathers in the cage, and then I've got all of that to clean up. So I just snip the wings off."*

## **Whole Prey Diets Help Cats With Problem Behaviors**

In case the thought of feeding whole prey to your cat is alarming to you, I should mention that more and more feline and veterinary behaviorists are advocating these diets not only for their nutritional quality, but also because they provide a mentally and emotionally enjoyable experience for cats.

If you have a cat who is neurotic, depressed, sad or has passive-aggressive issues, all of those things can be improved by making meal time fun. Offering your cat whole prey — the same prey they would hunt and eat in the wild — can be very satisfying and natural-feeling for them. I asked Tracy how long it took to transition her cats to whole prey.

*"That took a little bit of time," she answered. "A couple of them picked up on it right away. The kitty that's back here behind me, Ralph, took the longest. He was like, 'Yeah, I'm not really sure I want to do this.' I think it took him about 28 days exactly. So it took me 28 days to get them all switched to whole prey.*

*Most of them just really liked it. I love that you brought up the mental aspect of this. It absolutely matters. I have a friend who has a cat who is easily agitated. He gets angry very quickly. They started feeding him whole prey, but not the portion-sized whole prey.*

*They started feeding him larger whole prey animals that last for two or three meals. Believe it or not, it has had a great impact on his behavior. He's a lot calmer when he spends 10 to 15 minutes working on this rabbit to break it down and eat it. So it does matter."*

Zoos have been aware of this for a long time. If cats can't hunt, it tends to disrupt their spirit. They have a drive to stalk, pounce and shred. They need to use their claws. Those are all things cats are able to do when you offer them their evolutionary food source.

Understanding this reality about cats seems to help many owners get over the often difficult mental hump of feeding a dead prey animal with its little head and feet still attached. If you have a kitty with a long-standing or seemingly unsolvable behavior problem, if you transition to a whole prey diet, you may see tremendous improvement.

## How to Work With a Vet Who's Against Feeding Fresh

Next, I asked Tracy how she counsels people who want to feed a fresh food diet to their cat, but are getting an argument from their veterinarian.

*"That's a difficult one, because a lot of people do want to trust their vets," she replied. "The vets are getting pressure from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and all the other organizations saying, 'Oh my God. It's scary and dangerous. Don't do it.'"*

*Vets also see the mistakes people make with raw feeding. They're seeing people who feed just meat, and their cats are very ill and their bones are starting to get brittle because they're not getting the calcium they need, or they're not getting the organ meats they need. These kitties are being fed a nutritionally unbalanced diet, and vets are seeing the sad results.*

*I do tell people that if their vet is giving them pushback, just don't tell him what you're feeding. Really, that's what I tell them. Try to find a vet who will work with you, will understand what it is you're doing, or will at least respect your choice.*

*My veterinarian, when I first switched my cats, said something like 'You're kidding, right?' I said, 'Nope. I've done the research.' Actually, way back when I first switched, there was almost nothing out there. There was Dr. Pierson's website and that was pretty much it.*

*So I dug into it, researched it and talked to people for two years before I made the leap. That's why I built CatCentric, so people could have all the information in one place.*

*But when I first made the switch, my vet was resistant, and then he saw the cats and he saw the change in their behavior. They were all calmer. They were all friendlier. They were all more confident. He saw the change in their body condition. He said they were the friendliest and best-looking clowder (group of cats) he'd ever seen. He was so impressed he actually let me put material in his waiting room, on his coffee table."*

That's a very progressive vet! We're not taught about raw foods in veterinary school, so many vets hesitate or warn against it simply because they don't know anything about it. And then there are vets who don't even ask what their cat patients are fed, which of course isn't good, but at least you're not dragged into a debate with them!

However, I do recommend that you be honest with your veterinarian, and if she has an issue with raw food, ask her why. If she's concerned about nutritional imbalances, you can reassure her that you're following tried-and-tested recipes, and that you understand what can happen with an unbalanced homemade diet.

Another issue your vet may have is with the potential for health risks to human family members. If this is the case, you can reassure her that you handle your cat's raw food just as carefully and following the same protocol you use when handling raw food for the rest of your family. Asking your veterinarian to partner with you, I think, is a really powerful way to teach him or her about fresh foods.

## Interest in Fresh Diets Among Cat Owners Is Exploding

I know I raised plenty of eyebrows when I started talking about raw diets here at Mercola Healthy Pets nine years ago. I asked Tracy if her experience has been similar.

*"Absolutely," she answered. "On the veterinary side, it's very, very slow, but it's beginning to happen. On the consumer side, the cat owners' side, it's pretty much exploding, which is an awesome thing to see."*

*In the CatCentric Facebook group, of course, we're all about raw. People come to the group specifically to get information on fresh diets. Sometimes I'll go out to other online groups and just start answering questions for people with cats with urinary tract infections, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), chronic vomiting or diarrhea.*

*Their cat is having a problem and I'll recommend a fresh diet. Once upon a time when I recommended fresh food, the bashing I would be subjected to after posting was insane. Comment after comment telling me I'd lost my mind. But now, there are people who actually agree. People are more willing to think about it. They get the concept a little better today."*

## A Fresh Diet Helps Rapidly Improve Many Feline Disorders

We know from experience that fresh food can benefit cats with, for instance, IBD, cystitis and feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD). I asked Tracy what other medical conditions she's seen respond well to a transition to fresh food.

*"How much time do we have?" she jokingly asked. "Changing to a fresh diet results in very quick improvement in many feline disorders. It changes the composition of saliva. It changes the bacteria in the digestive tract. It changes pretty much everything in cats' bodies.*

*And it makes them feel better so they're happier and friendlier, and of course healthier over all. They have more energy. It's really an amazing transformation. When I made the change from canned to raw with my six cats, I was very lucky. They made the leap, all of them, pretty quickly, right off the bat. It was actually faster than I was comfortable with.*

*However, they were already eating the best canned cat food on the market at the time. They were eating a rotation of about 12 different foods. So I didn't expect to see a huge change when I switched them to raw, but the difference was mind-blowing, mostly in their energy level."*

The appearance of raw fed pets also changes in ways it's almost hard to explain. Their body composition changes. Skin condition improves and the coat gets shinier, with less shedding. Muscle tone improves and they lose their soft, pudgy appearance. Unless you've transitioned a pet to a fresh food diet and seen the changes for yourself, it's hard to explain the amazing transformation.

And having transitioned countless kitties from a biologically inappropriate diet to a fresh food diet, I agree with Tracy about the improvement we see in health conditions. Heart disease, kidney disease, obesity, age-related issues like stiffness and arthritis — all improved.



The improvement in IBD is probably one of the biggest. I actually know veterinarians who tell their clients it's "normal" for cats to throw up a lot. That shows you how rampant gastrointestinal (GI) issues are in cats today. They suffer from a lot of inflammatory bowel disease-like symptoms, and in my experience, one of the most notable improvements after switching to fresh food is in GI symptoms.

*"You know, when people think about bringing a cat into their home, they think about hairballs as though it's just a normal part of owning a cat," Tracy points out. "That, to me, is heartbreaking, because it's no more natural for a cat to throw up than it is for us to throw up. If they're throwing up two or three times or two or more hairballs a month, there's something going on. I've seen a switch to fresh food clear up hairballs and chronic vomiting in probably 9 cats out of 10."*

## **An Invaluable Online Resource for Cats and Their Humans**

Tracy has offered some really great advice today, and I asked her where people can go to learn more of her helpful (and free!) information.

*"You can go to **CatCentric**," she explained. "Everything you need, pretty much, to feed a fresh food diet is there. I have charts, diagrams, guidelines, cheat sheets and a raw feeding cat food pyramid, which I think is the only one out there. I'm kind of proud of that one. There's also information on behavior and general care."*

*If you want real-time assistance, like during a food transition, you can go to the **CatCentric Facebook group**. I have several wonderfully knowledgeable and compassionate admins who'll be happy to help you.*

*The group also has a set of volunteers we call 'subject matter experts.' If you're looking for canned food, they can recommend the best canned food. I know very little about the commercial side, because my focus is on fresh food. There's an IBD specialist and a couple of other health condition specialists. When their area of expertise pops up, we tag them to handle the questions.*

*If you can't get the answers you need from either of those resources, or if you're having a tough behavior problem you can't seem to solve, you can reach me on my commercial website, **CatCentric Consulting**. We can set up a one-to-one consult."*

I so appreciate Tracy's commitment to improving feline health, as well as her passion for feeding fresh, nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diets. There are very few resources like hers available specifically for cats, and I'm very thankful for the work she's doing to help cat parents care for their feline family members.

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